

# FLUENT FRENCH

*A Main Line Philadelphia couple changes accents but not their love of collecting*

By Laura Beach

They filled every nook and cranny of a 1780 stone farmhouse in Chester County, Pennsylvania, with hooked rugs and weather-vanes, pottery and samplers. They reared two sons amid the blessings and constraints that come with living with the fine and rare. They devoted weekends

and holidays to the hunt. And when they were finished they lacked only one thing, the inspiration to continue.

House full, collection done, this Philadelphia area couple did what others have perhaps imagined. They began again—passionately, completely, and without reservation. From

Photography by  
GAVIN ASHWORTH



Fig. 1. Painter and designer André Mare (1885–1932) included the inlaid, marble-topped maple and rosewood chest of drawers in the stair hall in his *salon bourgeois* for the Maison Cubiste. On it stands a gilt-bronze lamp designed by Maurice Dufrene (1876–1955). The chair of c. 1925 at the left is by Mare and his partner Louis Süe (1875–1968). Above the chair is *Jazz Musicians*, a 1920s tempera on paper by a Hungarian artist Hugó Scheiber (1873–1950). The undated marble nude, right, is attributed to Solon Borglum (1868–1922).

Fig. 2. The small walnut and walnut burl cabinet is one of a pair by Dufrene in the stair hall. They were published in 1924 in *Intérieurs-II*, a design portfolio edited by Léon Moussinac, where they were shown in a dining room designed by La Maîtrise, the furniture studio Dufrene directed for Galeries Lafayette. On the cabinet is *Eve*, a bronze modeled by Roger de la Fresnaye (1885–1925) c. 1910. Above hang a Murano glass sconce of c. 1940–1945 and *Sol de Tarde*, a 1947 oil on canvas by Argentine modernist Emilio Pettoruti (1892–1971).



Clockwise from top left:

Fig. 3. Jules Leleu (1883–1961) exhibited this serpentine-front burled-walnut and violet wood commode with ivory inlay, ivory pulls, and gilt-bronze mounts at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1923. Arranged on the marble top are, from left, a female torso in bronze by Franz Metzner (1870–1919), 1917; ancient bronze Mongolian chariot ornaments; and a bronze cast in 2005 from a 1935 wood sculpture by Henri-Paul Rey (1904–1981). Above the commode is a signed graphite study for *Deux nus en perspective* by Tamara de Lempicka (1898–1980), c. 1925.

Fig. 4. In the living room is a pair of c. 1933 rosewood armchairs designed by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (1879–1933). The cover fabric, designed by André Groult (1884–1966), was made to order for the collectors by Prelle in Lyon, France. The table of c. 1925 by Paul Follot (1877–1941), of amboyna with marquetry inlay, supports an ancient Sabaeen carved alabaster ibex and a stainless steel kinetic sculpture of 1964 entitled *Two Vertical Lines* by George Rickey (1907–2002), from an edition of five. Above a 1940s Dominique sofa hangs a c. 1920 oil portrait of Parthema Passano by Kenneth Frazier (1867–1949), a French-born American artist who exhibited in the 1913 Armory Show in New York.



Fig. 5. Dufrene designed this 71-inch high display cabinet made of purpleheart with violet wood veneers and inlays of silvered metal, mother-of-pearl, ebony, and boxwood. It was shown at the Deuxième Exposition d'Art décoratif contemporain in 1924. Today it holds the couple's growing collection of antiquities.

Fig. 6. The armchairs flanking the living room fireplace were designed by Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) and executed by J. and J. Kohn of Vienna in 1901. Acquired from Brussels dealer Yves Macaux, they are from a salon suite that originally included a settee and a side chair. Above hangs *Nocturne* by Harper Pennington (c. 1854–1920), an acolyte of James McNeill Whistler, c. 1890. The early nineteenth-century Egyptian revival marble mantel is French. On the mantel shelf are, at the left, a c. 1920 patinated bronze Christoffle vase and, on the right, *Figure Reclining on a Couch* by Oranzio Maldarelli (1892–1963). The carved wood Ashanti stool in front of the fireplace was purchased in the 1930s by Argentine diplomat Raúl Monsegur for his Buenos Aires apartment.

American folk art they turned to early modern art and design, much of it French. They changed their accent but in truth continued to speak the language of collecting, their shared voice deepened by their experience.

The stylistic segue was already underway in 2003 when they bought their present residence in a bosky suburb. Designed by architect Walter K. Durham (1896–1978), a specialist in gracious haunts for Main Line clients, and completed in 1935, the house reflects the junction of classicism and modernism in the early twentieth century. In a faint nod to tradition, pilasters support an ornamented pediment above the main entrance but the overall silhouette of the two-story house is restrained and reductive, with a cool, cerebral emphasis on line and proportion that suits the couple's new direction.

Each spouse came easily to collecting. The husband acquired his first piece of Americana, a Shaker butter churn, in 1959. He was intrigued by history at its most palpable, by artifacts isolated by the receding tides of time. As a young man living in Washington he happened upon bound volumes of nineteenth-century newspapers, unwanted and slated for disposal, in the basement of the Capitol and felt compelled to save them. "The guard said, 'Take them. They are from House Speaker Sam Rayburn's office,'" he recalls. It was the beginning of a sustained interest in antiquarian books and letters, an appreciation that has led the collector, a private equity investor trained in business and law at the University of Pennsylvania, to his current leadership role at one of the nation's leading collecting libraries.

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Fig. 7. Dominique walnut dining chairs of c. 1935 circle a rosewood dining table attributed to Soubrier of Paris, c. 1935, and set with 1930s Italian silver candleholders. The collectors commissioned the mahogany mantel, above which hangs *Nature morte aux fruits* of 1923 by Jean Lurcat (1892–1966), a painter and tapestry designer. On either side hang nickel-plated and frosted-glass French sconces that date to c. 1925, as does the molded glass and nickel-plated bronze ceiling fixture by the French lighting specialists Genet et Michon. Paul Follot designed the c. 1920 Brazilian rosewood cabinet inlaid with macassar ebony panels and lemonwood and ebony marquetry.

His wife, also bookish, is a former educator who devotes herself to civic causes. She brings a disciplining calm to her husband's exuberant enthusiasms, though like him she is sometimes, as in the case of a Glasgow school chair impulsively purchased at the Philadelphia Antiques Show, guided by intuition. Their taste is so similar that they have been known to negotiate independently, if briefly, on the same object, much to the vendor's amusement. Where collecting is concerned, they have one rule: art is to be lived with, not cosseted away for safekeeping.

Early in their married life the couple collected English silver, though "collected" is perhaps too strong a word. "For us, the silver was to use. We set tables and cooked in a different way then. We had fun but that time of our life has passed," says the husband.

It was after assembling a trove of academic American art, most of it later sold, that they began thinking of themselves as collectors. A handful of pieces from this early venture remain, among them Arthur B. Davies's oil on canvas *A Shrouded Bloom*, which hangs over the fireplace in the master bedroom, an Elie Nadelman drawing nearby; a white marble nude by Solon Borglum in the stair hall (see Fig. 1);

and a Reginald Marsh sketch in the living room.

Avant-garde in its time, it was a mahogany armchair of about 1902 designed by the influential Glasgow firm Wylie and Lochhead that first piqued the wife's interest in British arts and crafts design, which the couple, working with the specialist dealer and designer John Levitties of JAGR Projects in Philadelphia, gathered for their retreat in Colorado. The Glasgow school piece was later joined by a pair of sleek bent- and laminated beech armchairs conceived by Josef Hoffmann, a founder of the Vienna Secession design movement. Manufactured by J. and J. Kohn of Vienna around 1901, their inky black seat rails

with girdles of contrasting brass studs, the chairs are from a suite that originally included a matching settee and side chair (see Fig. 6).

Before long the couple was looking at early twentieth-century French design, which they came to admire for its clean lines, fine craftsmanship, and luxurious materials and finishes. "There was something about the simplicity and elegance that I loved," says the husband, whose search led them to Calderwood Gallery, Maison Gerard, and Barry Friedman, Ltd. "We think of art deco as a period not a style," says Philadelphia dealer Gary Calderwood, who seeks pieces made between about 1910 and 1950. "The centuries-old ébéniste tradition of the artist-designer working with an atelier of master craftsmen, journeymen, and apprentices began disappearing after World War II. Furniture produced this way was never inexpensive but by mid-century it was unaffordable to all but a very few."

The collectors favor art deco furniture made before 1926 by designers such as Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, Maurice Dufrene, Paul Follot, Jules Leleu, and Louis Süe and André Mare, masters who sought to reinterpret classical French tradition

Fig. 8. This games table and four matching armchairs, all of figured walnut, the table with a leather top, are by architect and designer Jean-Charles Moreux (1889–1956), c. 1924. Ingrid Donat (1957–) designed the bronze and parchment lamp, which dates to 1986 and is from an edition of eight. The club chair is by Eric Bagge (1890–1978), c. 1928.

## Inspired by documented *French design of nearly a century ago, the collectors replaced windows, doors, and mantels and added paneling and moldings*

and technique for a new century. One highlight of the collection is a vertical cabinet that was exhibited at the Deuxième Exposition d'Art décoratif contemporain au Pavillon de Marsan in March 1924 (Fig. 5). Made by Dufrene, its alluring surface is a patchwork of lustrous purpleheart veneers set off by inlays meticulously rendered in ebony, ivory, and violet wood. Dufrene—who directed Galeries Lafayette's furniture studio, La Maîtrise, an exhibitor at the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes—is also represented in the collection by a pair of small walnut and walnut burl cabinets of about 1924 (see Fig. 2), two chairs for the boudoir, and a bed.

Fascinated with period exhibition catalogues and design periodicals, the couple has built a substantial reference library, the underpinning of their studious approach to collecting and a source of ongoing revelation. After acquiring a serpentine-front burl walnut commode embellished with a floral bouquet of inlaid ivory (Fig. 3), they wanted to know more of its history. Jules Leleu had exhibited one com-



mode of this design at the Salon des Artistes Décorateurs in 1923 and then executed a second for a client. “The question was,” the husband recalls, “which one was this, the one displayed at the Salon, which belonged to Madame Chenard, heir to Chenard et Walcker, the automobile manufacturer that crafted the winning entry for the first Le Mans twenty-four-hour race? Or the commode made for Ambassador Gonzalo Zaldumbide of Ecuador?” Leafing through the annual reports of Paris’s Musée des Arts décoratifs the couple found the answer. The museum acquired the Zaldumbide

son Cubiste, the avant-garde display incorporating work by Marie Laurencin, Fernand Léger, Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and other progressive artists and designers at the 1912 Paris Salon d’Automne. Mare featured a version of *Eve*, a circa 1910 bronze nude by Roger de La Fresnaye also in the collection, in the previous year’s Salon d’Automne.

A pair of rosewood armchairs designed by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann (Fig. 4) are shown in color renderings in the May 1933 issue of *L’Illustration* and in a photograph reproduced by Emmanuel

original silhouette, paying particular attention to the distinctive bolstering of the arms and back. The silk cover fabric, a copy of a design created around 1913 by Parisian designer André Groult, was made to order by Prella in Lyon, France.

Calderwood Gallery supplied many of the carpets, both vintage French art deco examples and custom-made replicas. Inspired by documented French designs of nearly a century ago, the collectors replaced windows, doors, and mantels and added paneling and moldings to the interiors. Husband and wife also acquired period lighting designed by Dufrene, Genet et Michon, Albert Cheuret, and other French designers.

Regular visits to museums, galleries, and fairs here and abroad are part of the couple’s ongoing education. *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, a recent exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, persuaded them that draftsmanship is the foundation of all design, ancient to contemporary, an insight that encouraged them to broaden the scope of their collecting. One recent acquisition from Rupert Wace, a London authority in antiquities, is a carved stone ibex, made at the dawn of the Christian era in what is now Yemen. The wife has a growing collection of art jewelry, much of it ancient. Alert to the synergies between old and new, the collectors display the work alongside *Two Vertical Lines*, a 1964 tabletop abstraction in stainless steel by George Rickey, who pioneered kinetic sculpture in the 1940s (see Fig. 4).

On the day we visited, enthusiasts were gathering at Christie’s in New York for the landmark sale of property assembled by Steven A. Greenberg, a collector with the perspicacity and means to buy the best French art deco in the early 1970s when the field was young. The husband left bids, mostly on reference books, though he was also interested in the fine bindings. His cell phone buzzed every few moments throughout the day with queries and updates from his comrades on the scene.

“No one taught me how to look,” says the husband, who like his wife approaches visual phenomena with an agile, open mind and unlimited curiosity. But to be a collector is to look, learn, and look again. To collect is to travel—within one’s self, across time, through history, deep into cultural landscapes both inviting and forbidding. A single collection was not enough for this couple, whose most satisfying experiences have not confirmed what they already knew but forced them to reach for the unfamiliar.



Fig. 9. The terra-cotta relief panel on one wall of the games room is thought to be by Paul Vera (1882–1957), who designed for Louis Süe and André Mare. Below is a mid-1940s cabinet designed by Pierre-Paul Montagnac (1883–1961) of amboyna with inlays of silvered metal, mother-of-pearl, and assorted woods. Philadelphia metal artist Bill Gilbert (1964–2008) fashioned the railing at the left from early twentieth-century French radiator grills.

commode and a matching round mirror, leaving no doubt that the Chenard commode is the one residing outside Philadelphia. Also in the museum’s collection is the bed from the Zaldumbide suite, a gift of Maison Gerard of New York.

Other pieces with documented histories include an inlaid marble-topped maple and rosewood commode by the painter and designer André Mare, who included it in his *salon bourgeois* for the Mai-

Bréon in *Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann: Les Archives* (Flammarion, 2004), where they are seen in a corner of the designer’s Parisian showroom on the rue Lisbonne. “We believe that they are prototypes that were never copied for a client, perhaps because Ruhlmann died in 1933 and his studio was closed,” says the husband. Working from historical records, Elizabeth Lahikainen, an upholstery conservator in Salem, Massachusetts, re-created the chairs’



Fig. 10. This chiseled and partially gilded bronze cabinet titled *Homage à Klimt Fils* is from an edition of eight done in 2002 by Ingrid Donat. Above the cabinet is a gouache on paper by Morris Blackburn (1902–1979), a Philadelphia artist who trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.